

NEWS

March 10, 2006

Milo Mumgaard Awarded Lincoln/Lancaster Women's Commission Erasmus Correll Award,

Speech: "The Real Culture War"

Thank you very much to the Women's Commission for this award. It is very meaningful and humbling to be recognized in this way by such great advocates for women in our community.

It is an award that is shared with dozens of other people doing the work of Nebraska Appleseed. I am very proud of how Appleseed has directly helped to improve the quality of life for low-income women, not only in Lincoln, but throughout Nebraska and the region.

I would like to ask you to bear with me for a few minutes while I explain why this award is so important to all of us at Appleseed.

Our approach to improving law and policy for low-income women and others has always been a simple one: Become an effective voice for struggling Nebraskans in those places where public policy decisions are made- and make darn sure our elected leaders pay attention by being willing to aggressively act in so many places-in the courts, at the Unicameral and Congress, in partnership with diverse allies, in the "court of public opinion." After ten years, I can say we've done just that. Millions of dollars have been spent where it needs to be, thousands of families have received opportunities otherwise out of reach, and rights otherwise ignored or violated have gone vindicated. Without Nebraska Appleseed, this simply would not have happened.

But this is still a very difficult time, as we all know, for low-income women and their families. In one way in particular, this moment in history represents a particular danger. This danger comes from what I call the "real culture war." Right now, we have elected officials in dominant positions of power, from Congress through the Unicameral through local city councils and county commissions, who believe acting through government- that is, acting together as a community- to solve social problems is flatly wrong. Somehow, it has become acceptable to think government action to help people is almost unAmerican. And to use "other people's money" to do so is particularly offensive, and must be avoided at all costs- including the cost to the greater good.

This belief is certainly not a partisan one, with both Democrats and Republicans subscribing to this belief. This has led to the upside down priorities our elected leaders have at all levels- federal, state, local.

One basic historical fact reminds us of the wrenching impact of this current political cultural belief. It is widely viewed- and repeated- today by many elected officials that the "War on Poverty" launched in the 1960s- new and expanded public programs to address health care, education, job training, child care, and work supporting cash assistance to low-income families- was a dismal failure. The old saying is that that there was a war on poverty, and poverty "won."

Not true. The poverty rate in America was slashed in half between 1965 and 1979, during the height of the "War on Poverty." Unfortunately, the political will dissipated, and we saw the growing influence of those who believe government is the problem, not a part of the solution. Subsequently, these programs became continued targets of cutting, reducing, eliminating, and outright propaganda. Today, our poverty rates, especially for single mothers and children, have crept much higher, so that one in five children live below the poverty level- a place, I will remind you, of deep and severe economic hardship.

Despite the rewriting of history, the lesson of the “War on Poverty” remains a positive one: well designed and targeted public programs do reduce poverty, provide economic opportunity, and help mothers and fathers build a higher quality of life for their children. In short, government action- that is, you and I acting together- is indeed part of the solution. But our political culture today refuses to admit this, even acknowledge it. It is sobering to discover you can’t find the word “poverty” in most of the leading policy papers put out by the Democrats- as if mentioning “the poor” was politically radioactive by making you look too soft hearted. And to the extent many Republicans talk about poverty, it is most often as a “poverty” of individual will power, personal responsibility, and self-discipline- as if “the poor” were somehow living, working, and raising children outside of our economic, educational, and social systems.

The result: a profound shortchanging of what we can do, acting together as a community, to fight poverty, to make it possible that every child, every mother, every family can make it.

Appleseed has documented this in many ways. Our staff and volunteers have interviewed and followed dozens of Nebraska families facing the loss of their Medicaid, their child care, their Food Stamps, their educational opportunity, their support systems. We’ve produced reports on these families teeming with details on how, with just a little bit more public commitment to these families, they can and do overcome the very real barriers to joining other families who don’t fret night and day about food, shelter, jobs. As one mother put it:

“Losing the child care subsidy has put a tremendous amount of stress on me...There is no room in my budget to cut any more expenses out. My refrigerator is usually bare, my kids are wearing stained, torn and outgrown clothes. If I earn any extra money or get a raise, I will also get to look forward to getting cut off of Medicaid for the kids...I find myself crying myself to sleep at night, or crying mid-day at work... I shouldn’t be penalized for all my hard work... I just need a little more help, for a little while longer.”

We are at a crossroads where we could all simply stand back and watch as generations of these Nebraskans see their life chances amount to not many- and not so good. Or we can act. Thankfully, that’s what’s happening.

The direction of the “real culture war” is turning. People genuinely care, and want to see their political institutions act. Through the efforts of the Women’s Commission, Appleseed, and other friends, the political culture is taking note that Nebraskans really want our leaders to address poverty, despite the loud noise and smoke of those who don’t believe in government action.

I believe this culture war will finally be won, because enough Nebraskans do understand it is in the common good to be a society that doesn’t force a low-income mom to choose between food for her kids, a roof over their heads, or the medication that helps her stay employed.

In my view, it’s simple: once we stop thinking about poverty and growing inequality as a divine or natural thing, and look at it squarely as a shared responsibility, we can then recommit ourselves to the work of making Nebraska more like the place we all carry in our hearts.

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